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CAUSAL REFUTATIONS OF IDEALISM REVISITED

BY ANDREW CHIGNELL

Causal refutations of external-world scepticism start from our ability to make justified judgements about the order of our own experiences, and end with the claim that there must be perceptible external objects, some of whose states can be causally correlated with that order. In a recent paper, I made a series of objections to this broadly Kantian anti-sceptical strategy. Georges Dicker has provided substantive replies on behalf of a version of the causal refutation of idealism. Here I offer a few final remarks about issues at the heart of our disagreement.

Causal refutations of Cartesian external-world scepticism (the position which Kant calls ‘problematic idealism’) start from our ability to make justified judgements about the order of our own experiences, and end with the claim that there must be perceptible external objects, some of whose states can be *causally* correlated with that order.

In a recent paper in this journal, I made some objections to this broadly Kantian anti-sceptical strategy. One of its best and most prominent advocates, Georges Dicker, has now provided a series of intriguing and substantive replies.¹ This is not the place to attempt a detailed response, however. Instead, I propose to offer a few general remarks about issues at the heart of our disagreement.

I

In my previous piece, I argued that ‘clock-like’ features in our experience could play the role which causal refuters assign to external objects, and thus that there is no *a priori* ground for the claim that our ability to make justified judgements about the order of our experiences *requires* the existence of an external world. I also suggested that the empirical premise that experience usually fails to exhibit such clock-like features is highly contingent and thus out of place in Kant’s ‘strict proof’ of the ‘theorem’ that there is an external world of objects in space.

Dicker now offers a new account (pp. 179–81) according to which clock-like features, even if our experience did exemplify them, would not be ‘re-encounterable’,

¹ A. Chignell, ‘Causal Refutations of Idealism’, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 60 (2010), pp. 487–507; G. Dicker, ‘Kant’s Refutation of Idealism: a Reply to Chignell’, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 61 (2011) (this issue), pp. 175–83.

and this re-encounterability is required for something to play the relevant role in our ordering activity. This is a forceful reply, which if sound would provide the requisite *a priori* ground for the move to external objects. However, as far as I can see, it remains wholly unclear both why certain clock-like features of our experience could not be re-encountered in the relevant way, and why re-encounterability is required in the first place.

Suppose there is a digital clock in the corner of your visual field (it remains when you close your eyes), or a ‘voice in your head’ audibly counting off seconds throughout your conscious life. It would then seem plausible to say that over the course of your life you continually ‘re-encounter’ the same clock, or the same voice. But even if there is somehow a new clock or new voice at every instant, the fact that, by hypothesis, these ‘clock-like’ features of your experience count off the seconds in proper order is all that is required for them to serve as the measure for your other remembered states. (We are presuming that memory scepticism is not a threat in this context.) No external objects are necessary.

A related point: from Descartes’ point of view, the external world *itself* is not strictly speaking re-encounterable. Rather, he seems to hold that God recreates the entire world at every instant in accordance with pre-ordained laws or patterns.² But while there are various grounds on which Descartes could plausibly resist the Kantian response to Cartesian scepticism, it would be extremely odd if his doctrine of divine sustenance should turn out to be one of them.

II

Regarding the modal status of the argument as a whole, Dicker is right to point out that the first premise of the argument would be contingent if it referred to a particular subject’s experience (p. 179). The claim that ‘I [i.e., AC] can order my recollected states’ is clearly not a necessary truth, since there are many worlds in which, sadly, I have no recollections or do not even exist.

But despite his use of first-person formulations throughout this discussion, Kant is clearly not interested in particular subjects; rather, he is concerned with whether human *subjects in general* have the sort of experience whose features can underwrite the move to external objects. Thus the first premise is really about the general character of subjective experience for creatures with faculties like ours. Given that time is the form of *all* such experience, it seems fair to say that in some broad sense, the proposition expressed by ‘I (i.e., any subject with faculties like ours) am conscious of my existence as determined in time’ is a necessary truth. It is in the same spirit that Kant notes in the Aesthetic that ‘I can say *a priori* ... [and] entirely generally: all appearances in general, i.e., all objects of the sense, are in time, and necessarily stand in relations of time’ (B51).

That Kant’s anti-sceptical argument is meant to be *a priori* is also clear from the fact that he explicitly introduces it as a ‘theorem’ followed by a demonstration

² See, e.g., his argument from the ‘nature of time’ (*temporis natura*), in *Meditation 3* (AT 7:48–9, CSM II, 32–3).

(B275), and elsewhere refers to it as a ‘strict proof’ (Bxxxix, note). For Kant (as for Aristotle), a strict proof is by definition *universal* and *necessary*, where universality and necessity are the ‘secure marks [*Kennzeichen*]’ of the *a priori* (B4). Dicker observes that Kant refers to our awareness of our experience as ‘empirically determined’ in the theorem of the Refutation (p. 179). But this does not make the proof or any of its premises contingent; rather, it is just Kant’s way of saying that our inner experience is (by necessity) *temporally* ordered.

In contrast, the Causal refuter’s premise about the absence of ‘clock-like’ features in most though not all of our experience is quite empirical, *a posteriori* and contingent, and thus remains problematic in the ways I suggested.

III

Finally, a more focused remark. Dicker revises his version of the key correlation principle as follows (p. 177):

Unless we have some independent justification for believing that there are Bs, we can correlate As with Bs only if we perceive Bs.

He then uses this to ground the claim that we must not only link our mental states with external objects but must also *perceive* the latter.

But this principle, too, seems problematic. Suppose I have adopted the policy that when I feel pain in a certain part of my body, I think of a Greek god whose name begins with the same letter as the name of that body part. Thus when I felt a pain in my ankle, I thought of Athena; when my hip ached, I thought of Hermes; when my proboscis was hurting, I thought of Poseidon. Surely I have correlated my pains (As) with some ancient Greek deities (Bs) here, even though I have not perceived the latter and have no independent justification whatsoever for believing they exist.

This scenario illustrates once again, I submit, that it is very hard to find plausible principles that can take us from shared features of our inner experience to the world of external objects in the way causal refutations of idealism suggest.

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